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AUTHOR Chambliss, Catherine
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ABSTRACT

Drawing on current research, this paper advocates the optimization and enhancement of quality in group day care. Child development researchers offer many suggestions for improving the quality of child care. Recent research has indicated the importance peers play in children's development. Researchers have also indicated the importance of establishing educational practices which offer exposure to multisensory stimulation, warm relationships that invite and reward language practice, and the establishment of consistent rules and routines. Efforts to accommodate differences in children's temperaments are also important. This paper draws upon all of these research conclusions to provide classroom management strategies for enhancing day care: (1) atmosphere (creating a positive, enjoyable workplace for teachers); (2) articulating goals (creating clear, measurable classroom objectives); and (3) accountability (creating contingencies that reinforce effective teaching). The paper also lists five external environmental context factors, including: (1) community values and attitudes; (2) parent attitudes; (3) employer attitudes; (4) school board attitudes; and (5) government attitudes. Finally, the paper describes two methods for enhancing day care quality, including solution-focused management strategies and enhancement of how children are taught. (Contains 19 references.) (Author/SD)

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Enhancing the Quality of Child Care: Lessons from Research

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Catherine Chambliss, Ph.D.
Chair, Dept. of Psychology
Ursinus College
Collegeville, PA 19426

1999

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Recent developmental neuroscience findings underscore society's need to provide good care to all children in the first years. However, simple, nostalgic thinking obfuscates our understanding of the ideal. Group day care can be best for many children, if we work to optimize it.

There is a very important time in a child's life, beginning at birth, when he or she should be living in an enriched environment, because that lays the foundation for development later in life. Visual, auditory, language, and tactile stimulation should be optimal during early childhood, because stimulation during this period primes the brain for all later learning.

Documenting the times when the brain is biologically best equipped to learn is expected to have a major impact on society. Understanding how the environment "tunes up" the brain during certain critical periods opens up a new frontier. It gives early childhood educators a powerful reason to say to society, "Don't wait. You don't get another window of opportunity like that."

Not only are more mothers of infants working than ever before, but many men are working longer hours. Children are often left to fend for themselves, all too often surrendering to the passive habit of watching TV, instead of interacting with their environment. Parents in all social classes have less time to put into the management and orchestration of what a child needs during this critical period of time. Day care must be upgraded nationally to provide the best kind of learning environment for children when their parents are unable to do so. High quality day care can help to solve many of these problems, because if offers children the valuable opportunity to interact with other children.

Many believe that if we don't invest in the early rearing environment of our children, we're going to be paying for our neglect for the rest of their lifetimes. Poor care early in life increases the risks of mental disorders and physical diseases, and can result in individuals' failure to develop self management skills.

Responsive, stimulating experiences for young children are provided by many day care centers, and many are committed to continually enhancing the

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quality of child care. Research on child development offers many suggestions for improving the quality of child care. Educational practices that offer varied exposure to multi-sensory stimulation, warm relationships that invite and reward language practice, and establishment of consistent rules and routines, all seem to be very beneficial. Efforts to accomodate differences in children's temperaments are also important. Optimal stimulation or corrective feedback for one child may be overwhelming to another. Day care providers must have sufficient opportunity to learn about these differences among their students.

Recent work has emphasized the pivotal role peers play in children's development. Some argue that peers are even more influential than parents in shaping behavior and attitudes (Gladwell, M., 1998; Begley, S., 1998; Harris, J.,1998). Since group day care provides early experiences in relating to peers, it may offer previously ignored advantages. While many early childhood educators have focused on the establishment of basic learning skills and school readiness as goals of day care, development of self regulation and social skills may be as important to children's later competence. Instead of defensively viewing day care centers' need to teach children how to share and wait as an unfortunate biproduct of too many students, we might wish to view the opportunity to acquire these skills early as a valuable social headstart (perhaps even more important than learnng to identify colors and letters by name).

In addition, rather than viewing the day care child's need to form trusting relationships with a variety of adult caregivers as inferior to an undiluted exclusive relationship with a stay at home mother, we might view this as a more appropriate model for future social relatedness. Although the romantic ideal of finding one perfect partner who will meet all of one's needs lives on in our minds, in actuality, most well adjusted adults find it helpful to establish complex social networks, which enable them to be in mutually sustaining relationships with various people. This capacity for multiple attachments may blossom early in children who have positive experience with several peers and multiple adults.

Classroom Management Strategies for Enhancing Day Care:

The Three A's:

1. ATMOSPHERE

Creating a positive, enjoyable workplace for teachers

2. ARTICULATING GOALS

Creating clear, measurable clasroom objectives

3. ACCOUNTABILITY

Creating contingencies that reinforce effective teaching

External Environmental Context Factors:

Community Values & Attitudes: Myths and misunderstanding
Parents' Attitudes
Employers' Attitudes
School Board Attitudes
Government Attitudes

Enhancing Day Care Quality

I. Solution-focused management strategies

Enhancing mutual satisfaction

How can we enjoy children more?

What works?
How can we do more of it?
What are the exceptions to the problems?
How can we have more of them?

II. Enhancing how we teach children

In

Teacher's strengths (abilities and effort)
School's support(resources and reinforcements)
Parent's support(collaboration and reinforcement)
Children's strengths(abilities and effort)
Teacher's peer support (validation and celebration)
Other sources of support

Out

Caring

Emotional Availability, and Engagement
Enthusiasm, encouragement, joy, support, respect

Coping

Emotional Restraint and Management
Patience, self-control, forgiveness
Problem-solving, redirection

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